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National Center of Competence in Research –
The Migration-Mobility Nexus

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Swiss citizens choose to emigrate:
what are the policy implications?

in a nutshell #18, July 2020



SWISS NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

The National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR)
are a research instrument of the Swiss National Science Foundation

Messages for Decision-Makers

Swiss citizens emigrate mainly for personal and professional development reasons, on a temporary basis.

The knowledge and connections of these people represent an important resource for a globally connected country such as Switzerland.

75% of Swiss nationals living abroad have dual citizenship, which raises new issues in the area of political participation.

Identifying as Swiss should not be a matter of territorial location, but rather of forming part of a worldwide network.

What is meant by...

... Swiss abroad

A person of Swiss nationality with a place of residence abroad. They may have emigrated themselves, or be the child or naturalized family member of a Swiss national living abroad.

... Fifth Switzerland

Along with the four linguistic and geographical regions of Switzerland, Swiss nationals living abroad are often regarded as a fifth element of the country. The term evokes associations with extraterritorial national provinces and a collective Swiss identity.

... Migrant

According to the definition of the IOM, a person who has temporarily or permanently left his/her habitual place of residence within a country or across a border. However, many well-educated individuals who leave voluntarily do not refer to themselves as "migrants," since they understand the term as denoting those who migrate on the basis of economic hardship or persecution.

Why do some 30,000 Swiss citizens choose to leave Switzerland each year – a country that scores highly in international rankings in terms of income, quality of infrastructure, stability, safety and quality of life? Who are these people, what are their reasons for emigrating, what is their experience of life in other countries, how do their attitudes towards Switzerland change over time, and what are the implications for Swiss domestic and foreign policy?

Switzerland is a country of emigration as well as immigration. Most emigrants leaving Switzerland in the early 20th century were driven by poverty, whereas today people emigrate for many different reasons. Since the 1960s, growing numbers of Swiss citizens have moved abroad, forming a "fifth Switzerland" that at the end of 2019 amounted to about 770,000 people. There is also an unknown number of Swiss citizens who reside partly or entirely abroad, but have retained their official residence in Switzerland.

The statistics show that Swiss nationals living abroad are predominantly of working age, female, and dual citizens. Most of them live in Europe, particularly in France, Germany, and Italy. 37% have moved to another continent, mainly North America and Australia, but Asia is the fastest-growing continent of destination.

Based on two case studies of Swiss nationals emigrating to China and Northern Europe and several interviews with highly qualified Swiss residents of Asian and North American cities, this policy brief presents further insights into this phenomenon.

What reasons prompt the decision to emigrate?

Migration is often seen as the search for more economically and politically stable living conditions. But this simplistic explanation is clearly not relevant to the decision to emigrate from such a prosperous country as Switzerland.

It was precisely this high standard of living and stability that made our interview subjects feel somewhat "hemmed in" in Switzerland, with limited opportunities to discover and achieve something new. Many of those who migrate from Switzerland seek more scope to develop themselves personally or professionally, new challenges, or the chance to fulfill a lifelong dream. Purely financial concerns are rarely at

the forefront, and many of the people we interviewed are quite prepared to accept a lower standard of living.

"Many of those who migrate from Switzerland seek more scope to develop themselves personally or professionally, new challenges, or the chance to fulfill a lifelong dream."

Another reason cited particularly by Swiss migrants to rapidly developing economies was the innovation potential to be found there, and the possibility of participating in a dynamically evolving economic and social development process, as an entrepreneur or a specialist. Some destinations are also seen as providing a better work-family balance.

Often the impulse to migrate is associated with a life transition. Many opted to leave after completing their education, because of a separation, on reaching a significant birthday, or after meeting a new partner. Conversely, a concern for children's education can be a motive for returning to Switzerland. Increasing numbers of Swiss citizens migrate to warmer and more affordable locations upon retirement, but similarly, many Swiss living abroad also move back at this stage of their lives.

What kind of work do the Swiss abroad do?

These migrants are usually prepared to put up with unfamiliar conditions and keen to sell their skills and build networks. Many of them describe themselves as open and innovative risk-takers. The extent of recognition of the education and work experience of Swiss migrants in their new environment varies according to the local labor market. Swiss specialists find the Anglo-Saxon employment context in particular,

highly competitive. But in any event, Swiss migrants are unlikely to have their educational qualifications significantly undervalued, as is often the case with other migrants. In rapidly developing economies like China, a Swiss educational qualification and “Western” origin can actually be a competitive advantage in some industries, when combined with local knowledge. Many find themselves working in sectors that are still in the growth phase, whereas in Switzerland, a level of saturation may have already been reached.

What new forms of migration and mobility are emerging now?

Most Swiss nationals living abroad do not see their decision to relocate as permanent, but rather as a venture undertaken for a limited period. They give themselves a period of several years to make a go of it, but are quite willing to contemplate returning home or traveling onward to another destination. Migration, therefore, becomes a process potentially leading to onward travel to other countries, moving back and forth between two or more states, and the development of a transnational activity focus. International start-up entrepreneurs, for example, tend to follow a global business model, and build their everyday lives, social connections, and cultural orientation around constant mobility. This lifestyle depends on the ability to always be on the move, having the right kind of qualification and adequate financial resources, and having a “strong” passport and the right sociocultural attributes.

How does their attitude towards Switzerland change over time?

Most interviewees can be described as displaying an attitude of positive but critical patriotism. They value Switzerland’s economic stability, its political system, the reliability of public services and the legal system, the high-quality public education, and the high standard of living and beauty of the landscape. But many see Swiss society as lacking cosmopolitan openness, courage and international engagement, and believe that their international experience and relationships and potential to contribute new ideas are not sufficiently valued.

There are differing views on the contribution offered by the Swiss state for individuals and Swiss firms abroad, particularly start-ups. Diplomatic missions attract both positive and negative comments, but support to business development is generally found to be of little use. Most have the impression that state and semi-state institutions lack the required networks and knowledge of the local business environment on the ground. Start-ups and SMEs see a lack of low-threshold infrastructure and support offers in the establishment- and early development phase.

Attitudes on citizenship issues are largely pragmatic. For many interviewees, their “red passport” demonstrates their allegiance to Switzerland, and they value and use their citizen’s rights and the opportunities these provide. But at the same time, 75% of Swiss nationals living abroad hold two or more passports, which reflects their multi-local sense of belonging and provides them with increased security and flexibility.

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“In an environment defined by globalization and mobility, self-realization and the development of an ‘entrepreneurial self’, specific networks, and situational belonging become more important than identification with the collective entity of a nation state.”
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Therefore, the attitude towards state citizenship among Swiss nationals living abroad – as well as among many migrants in Switzerland – does not match the expectations of Swiss policymakers and authorities when granting residence permits and citizenship applications. A policy that views integration as a linear process or recognizes ever greater convergence with the lifestyle of the non-mobile population does not match the reality of many people with a mobile lifestyle. In an environment defined by globalization and mobility, self-realization and the development of an “entrepreneurial self”, specific networks, and situational belonging become more important than identification with the collective entity of a nation state.

What form of inclusion to be considered for the Swiss abroad?

But what are the implications for a society, if it is more and more only partially utilized and constituted by members, who are rather mobile and transnational? Who should participate in the political process – and where – in a globally interconnected world, in which more and more people are at the same time foreigners in their place of residence and external citizens of their home country? Since their voting rights in referendums and elections can only be exercised via the cantons, many Swiss abroad deem their political voice ineffective. Some other states give their nationals living abroad a greater measure of political influence by reserving a set number of seats in parliament for them. This enables nationals living abroad to compensate for an excessively introverted view of politics at home.

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“A highly connected country like Switzerland has much to gain from acknowledging and utilizing the resources that migrants leaving and entering the country represent, both socially and politically.”
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Another important element of social participation is the pension system, which is organized at the level of nation states and focused on lifelong employment in the same country. In view of increasing international mobility and a connected economy, there is a need to develop more flexible systems that will not disadvantage mobile citizens against their more sedentary counterparts. A central problem for Swiss nationals living abroad who reside and work outside the EU/EFTA is access to voluntary OASI/DI and 2nd pillar benefits. They are required to pay both the employer and employee contributions, plus additional administrative costs, and accordingly they pay higher contributions and receive lower pension amounts. Improved access to social insurance benefits and health insurance under domestic Swiss conditions is therefore one of the major reasons prompting some Swiss nationals living abroad to retain their official place of residence in Switzerland, placing them in a legal “gray area.”

State and society seen as a network?

A highly connected country like Switzerland has much to gain from acknowledging and utilizing the resources that migrants leaving and entering the country represent, both socially and politically. Increased recognition of the multi-layered aspects of migration would make it possible to take global interconnectedness into account more effectively in policy-making and other social processes. Social and pension systems, state citizenship and political rights should be better tailored to the needs of internationally mobile people. Yet many politicians and policymakers see increased mobility and multiple citizenship primarily as a loss of political integration. Should that be a reason for defining the state

community more narrowly, by excluding groups that cannot be unambiguously “pigeon-holed”? Instead, we call for a rethink of the whole issue of citizenship and belonging. If numerous citizens are no longer living in their territory of origin, this creates a valuable global network. From this perspective, the state is no longer perceived merely as a demarcated territory, but rather as an association of people spread over the entire world. This would be a more open and complex entity than a “state” today, but not necessarily any less powerful, which particularly for a small, but economically competitive country, like Switzerland, could generate some significant advantages.

Further reading

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Müller, Seraina and Aldina Camenisch. “Re-negotiating Switzerland from Abroad. An Ethnographic Approach to Citizenship-Belonging Nexuses”. *Switzerland and Migration*, B. Lüthi, D. Skenderovic (eds.). London: Palgrave Macmillan (2019), p. 327–334.

Sandoz, Laure. “Mobilities of the Highly Skilled towards Switzerland. The Role of Intermediaries in Defining ‘Wanted Immigrants’”. Cham: Springer, 2019.

Sontag, Katrin. “Mobile Entrepreneurs. An Ethnographic Study of the Migration of the Highly Skilled”. Opladen: Budrich, 2018.



The Mobility of the Highly Skilled towards Switzerland

**A project of the nccr – on the move
Walter Leimgruber, University of Basel**

Migrants to Switzerland are better educated than ever before. Yet, while many hold highly regarded positions, others are unable to use their skills. Our goal is to understand the implications of uneven access to resources, opportunities and social participation for different groups of highly qualified migrants.

in a nutshell #18 is based primarily on the project “The Swiss Abroad” (associated with the nccr – on the move) by Walter Leimgruber, Aldina Camenisch and Seraina Müller, and on the project “Living and working in different places: biography and labor migration of highly qualified people from a cultural-anthropological perspective” by Jacques Picard, Walter Leimgruber, Monika Götzö and Katrin Sontag.

We thank Metka Hercog, Laure Sandoz and Katrin Sontag for their comments.

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The nccr – on the move is the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies and aims to enhance the understanding of contemporary phenomena related to migration and mobility in Switzerland and beyond. Connecting disciplines, the NCCR brings together research from the social sciences, economics and law. Managed from the University of Neuchâtel, the network comprises fourteen research projects at ten universities in Switzerland: The Universities of Basel, Geneva, Lausanne, Lucerne, Neuchâtel, Zurich, ETH Zurich, the Graduate Institute Geneva, the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland, and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Northwestern Switzerland.

“in a nutshell” provides answers to current questions on migration and mobility – based on research findings, which have been elaborated within the nccr – on the move. The authors assume responsibility for their analyses and arguments.

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